



King County

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King County Charter Review Commission
Governmental Structure Subcommittee
Briefing Paper – Instant Runoff Voting/Ranked Choice Voting
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I. Problem Statement

Should the voting practice of instant runoff voting be implemented in King County?

II. Background

Instant-runoff voting (IRV) is a voting system used for single-winner elections in which voters may rank candidates in order of preference. In an IRV election, if no candidate receives a majority of first choices, the candidate with the fewest number of votes is eliminated, and ballots cast for that candidate are redistributed to the surviving candidates according to the voters' indicated preference. This process is repeated until one candidate obtains a majority. The term 'instant runoff voting' is used because this process simulates a series of run-off elections.

In some implementations of IRV, a winner may be declared with less than a majority of ballots cast, based on a plurality in the last round. In other implementations, the failure of any candidate to obtain a majority will result in a runoff or other process. Runoff voting is a system used whereby rounds of voting continue until one candidate achieves a majority.

With IRV, multiple candidates from a political party are able to run together in the general election. No primary is necessary. Candidates are elected in a single, high turnout election,

thereby strengthening democratic accountability. In addition, taxpayers only need to fund one election instead of two.

Pierce County, WA is the first county set to implement this practice in Washington State. Pierce County will elect its county officials using IRV for the first time in November, 2008.

In the United States the other following cities, states, and countries have implemented IRV:

San Francisco, CA
Burlington, VT
Takoma Park, MD
Arkansas (overseas military voters)
South Carolina (overseas voters)
North Carolina (judicial vacancies)
Cary, North Carolina
Hendersonville, North Carolina
Australia and Ireland

IRV is also set to be implemented in the following areas of the United States:

Minneapolis, MN
Alameda County, CA (Oakland, Berkeley, San Leandro)
Ferndale, MI
Pierce County, WA

Instant runoff voting is more complex, both in terms of casting votes and counting them, than conventional systems. Voters have the power to rank candidates in order of preference rather than merely write an 'x' beside a single candidate. Changing from a plurality to an IRV system may therefore require the replacement of voting machinery.

IRV has been implemented in cities using optical scan machines, as in San Francisco and Burlington, VT. A hand count also is possible under IRV and is the method used in most non-American jurisdictions; however it is usually more time-consuming. It is claimed that IRV is less expensive than runoff voting because it is only necessary for voters to go to the polls once; however, the comparative expense would depend on how often runoffs were needed. IRV may also be less likely to induce voter fatigue, and exit polls indicate voters prefer IRV over two-round runoffs.

III. Current Opinion

During the public outreach process, a number of citizens commented on instant runoff voting. Overall, 21 citizens have addressed the issue. Fifteen citizens spoke in favor of IRV, and five against. A summary of their comments follows:

ORGANIZATION/ INDIVIDUAL	FAVORS INSTANT RUNOFF VOTING	IRV COMMENTS
Suzie Sheary (Chair - King County Democrats)	--	No formal position. Monitoring Pierce County Elections.
Don Whiting (Form Chief Elections Official for Washington State)	No	Hard to understand. IRV not the most effective preference voting system. See how it works in Pierce before King County considers it.
Ivan Weiss (34 th District Democrats)	No	IRV should be defeated. It is meant to cut into the partisan primary which is required by law. There are significant problems with Pierce County.
Margaret Loos	No	The primary is a useful nominating election. You can vote a different party every primary if you want.
Michael Young (Chair – King County Republicans)	No	Opposed to Instant Runoff Voting. It's a bad idea.
Ralph Munro (Former Secretary of State)	No	IRV is hard to understand. King County has enough issues with its elections department – monitor Pierce County and make a decision on IRV after implementation.
Bob Loeliger	Yes	IRV allows a person to rank his candidate preference. In favor of adopting IRV.
Christopher Winebarger	Yes	IRV will yield more accurate results in elections. Would like to see IRV used in the presidential elections.
F. John Jeannot	Yes	Implement IRV as a more accurate way of identifying the will of the people. We need to move beyond the current two party system and will facilitate growth.
Garth Atchison	Yes	Implement Instant Runoff Voting. It negates the effect of partisanship.
Goodspaceguy Nelson	Yes	Enact a system of Preference/rank/choice voting. It negates the effect of partisanship.
J. Rouleau	Yes	Implement IRV and follow the Pierce County model.
James Burrows	Yes	Ranked choice voting eliminates the primary, which costs a million dollars
Janet Anderson (Citizens for Proportional Representation)	Yes	King County should investigate a more fair election system, such as proportional voting

Kathryn Keller	Yes	IRV will save us money and also work really well for King County elections. Most folks are independent, party membership is not declared on our voter registration cards, so primaries are just plain painful. IRV also allows us to end up with elected officials who are least acceptable” to the vast majority.
Linde Knighton	Yes	Implement IRV in King County as Pierce county has done. It saves enormous amounts of money after the initial changeover, and cuts out mudslinging campaigns.
Lindsey Nussbaum	Yes	Enact a system of preference/ranked/choice voting: voters should be able to vote for their first choice.
Melvin Mackey	Yes	Our current method of electing representatives tend to over-represent majority viewpoints. Improved election methods also allows voters to vote for the candidates they like best without throwing away votes
Scott Lindsley (Libertarian Party)	Yes	We should vote through instant Runoff Voting in King County, as Pierce County has done. It saves enormous amounts of money after initial changeover, and really cuts out mudslinging campaigns.
Toby Nixon	Yes	Ranked choice/instant runoff voting would open up more diversity in the elections process and enable more voices to be heard.
Todd Boyle	Yes	Implement instant runoff voting in King County.

V – Pierce County Presentation and Summary¹

Pierce County Auditor Pat McCarthy delivered a very thorough and detailed presentation on IRV to the Charter Review Commission on November 27th 2007. Ms. McCarthy outlined the impacts and challenges to Pierce County elections during implementation of Ranked Choice Voting (RCV – Pierce County renamed the system to make it easier for voters to understand). Major political parties will now choose who can use the party label through internal party rules. No partisan or nonpartisan primaries will be held for RCV races. The winner will be elected at the general election.

In terms of process, Pierce County voters will rank their choices in order of preference and the elections will be conducted in rounds. Every first choice is counted and the candidate with the fewest votes after each round is eliminated. Voters who selected the eliminated candidate as their first choice will have their second and third choices reassigned as their first and second choices.

¹ Pierce County Presentation – Ranked Choice Voting – A Work in Progress – Nov. 27th 2007

This process will continue until one candidate has a majority. The candidate with the majority is then deemed elected.

Ms. McCarthy did express that there were challenges in implementing RCV, emphasizing voter education as the largest hurdle. Ms. McCarthy requested funding to educate all voters about RCV, including multiple ballot pages and how to mark a ballot. She noted that combining RCV for county races with the plurality system for all other races created complexity in educating the voters. She stressed the importance of every voter having complete trust in the process and knowing that “their vote counted.” Ms. McCarthy plans to incorporate additional RCV voter education costs into her 2008 budget request.

V – Final Analysis

In the U.S., there is extensive debate about the merits of IRV compared to existing plurality voting and two-round systems, and also to other possible reforms. Below are some of the arguments used in the IRV debate, in comparison to existing plurality, actual runoff systems, and other voting methods.

Pros:

Proponents of IRV argue that it:

- Is simple and easy for voters²
- Encourages sincere voting and reduces the need for tactical voting, when compared with the two-round system³
- Allows one ballot to find a majority winner, with no need for a primary, which saves time for voters, lowers expenses (both for the public and for candidates), and increases voter turnout⁴
- Reduces negative campaigning, through candidates campaigning to receive voters’ second and third choice votes
- Helps third parties gain traction by reducing the effect of vote splitting⁵

Cons:

Critics of IRV argue that the system:

- Does not count all votes, and thus can pass over a candidate preferred by a majority over the IRV winner⁶
- Is more expensive to implement than other systems; requiring changes to ballots and/or voting equipment⁷

² <http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/Elections/measures/2004/march/Iirv.htm#for>

³ John J. Bartholdi III, James B. Orlin (1991) "Single transferable vote resists strategic voting," *Social Choice and Welfare*, vol. 8, p. 341-354

⁴ <http://www.fairvote.org/irv/faq.htm>

⁵ <http://www.pasadenaweekly.com/article.php?id=4041&IssueNum=46>

⁶ <http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/Elections/measures/2004/march/Iirv.htm>

⁷ http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4176/is_20050421/ai_n15822089

- Has not been shown to reduce negative campaigning (critics argued that that claim is a myth)⁸
- Takes more effort for voters compared to some other systems⁹
- Will result in more spoiled ballots¹⁰; and
- Doesn't give voters a second chance to re-evaluate candidates as with an actual runoff.

Respectfully submitted by Mark Yango

⁸ <http://www.beyondchron.org/news/index.php?itemid=1468>

⁹ http://www.dailytribune.com/stories/102504/edu_ferndale25001.shtml

¹⁰ <http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/Elections/measures/2004/march/Irv.htm#against>